

**GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING**

(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)

West of Administration and Clinics Building

Balboa Heights Vicinity

Former Panama Canal Zone

Republic of Panama

HABS No. CZ-11-B

HABS  
CZ  
1-BALH.V  
1B-

**PHOTOGRAPHS**

**WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA**

**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY**

National Park Service

Department of the Interior

Intermountain Field Area

Rocky Mountain System Support Office

12795 West Alameda Parkway

Post Office Box 25287

Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)

HABS  
CZ  
I-BALH.V,  
IB-

HABS NO. CZ-11-B

For information about other structures at Gorgas Hospital, see:

HABS No. CZ-11	GORGAS HOSPITAL
HABS No. CZ-11-A	ADMINISTRATION AND CLINICS (Building 237)
HABS No. CZ-11-C	SHOPS AND BOILER HOUSE (Buildings 240 and 240A)
HABS No. CZ-11-D	ISOLATION WARD (Building 242)
HABS No. CZ-11-E	SECTIONS A AND B (Buildings 255 and 253)
HABS No. CZ-11-F	MORTUARY AND CHAPEL (Building 257)
HABS No. CZ-11-G	SECTION O (Obstetrical Building, Building 261)
HABS No. CZ-11-H	MAIN STAIRS AND PASSAGEWAYS

Location: West of Administration and Clinics Building, Balboa Heights, Former Panama Canal Zone, Republic of Panama

Present Owner: United States Department of Defense

Original Use: Kitchen and Mess Building for Gorgas Hospital

Present Use: Medical Administration Building, USA MEDDAC-Panama

Significance: The Kitchen and Mess acted as the main kitchen and dining hall for the permanent hospital complex. Constructed in 1917, this reinforced concrete building with Italian Renaissance detailing was centrally located to facilitate the transfer of food. Significant for its support role within the Canal Zone's premiere health facility, Building 238 now houses the administrative offices of USA MEDDAC-Panama.

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 2)

A. General Statement:

1. History:

The Kitchen and Mess was the locus for food preparation and storage within the permanent hospital complex built between 1915 and 1919 on the northeast slope of Ancon Hill by the United States government. Construction began in 1917 under the direction of the Building Division of The Panama Canal. The original architectural drawings or "as-builts" date to June and July of 1917 and the statement of responsibility shows that Samuel M. Hitt, the Panama Canal Building Division architect, was responsible for its design while H. Rowe, resident engineer, was credited with the engineering components of the design. T. C. Morris, the Building Division's assistant engineer in charge of foundation work, reinforced concrete, and analyses for size and dimensions of beams, columns and floors reviewed the plans.

Hitt's design, which drew from the style and scale of the permanent architecture constructed in the adjacent canal community of Balboa, created a notable building that was able to handle the new hospital's food preparation needs for both gold and silver employees. The design worked with the dramatic slope of the building's site, allowing a half basement floor in the south end of the building. In addition it was functionally linked to the other hospital buildings by walkways and covered passageways, permitting the easy transfer of meals and food supplies and easy access for convalescent diners.

Historic descriptions note that the basement floor contained a bakery, a refrigeration area, an ice cream making area, and restrooms and lockers for employees. The main floor housed the kitchen with electric ranges, storeroom, cold storage rooms, workroom, diet kitchen, steward's office, scullery, pantry and separate dining facilities for the kitchen employees, maids, and non-white male and female convalescent patients. The upper floor was reserved for two large dining areas; one for the doctors and nurses and the other for white convalescent patients. A service area was located between the two dining rooms. This area included: a large pantry outfitted with a steam table, coffee urns, dish-washing machine, linen closet, wash room and a set of dumbwaiters that ran between the main kitchen and the service entry. An elevator large enough to hold six food carts provided service between the kitchen and basement floor; passageways led from the basement floor to the associated ward buildings nearby.

## GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING

(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)

HABS No. CZ-11-B

(Page 3)

The Kitchen and Mess Building was owned by the Panama Canal Commission until 1977 when it was transferred to the Department of Defense according to the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977. It is currently used as a Medical Administration Building.

### 2. Architectural Character:

The Kitchen and Mess Building is a reinforced concrete, rectangular building with a two story central mass, one story wings, and a partial front basement. Narrow and long, its two story central mass is covered with a hipped, red Spanish tile roof with projecting eaves. The upper story of the central mass is complemented by pairs of single windows flanked by structural columns. Some of these window openings have been infilled with concrete block and then stuccoed. The lower stories are rectangular, extending out from the two story central mass to the north and south. The front elevation is punctuated by regularly spaced window openings on the first floor and an arcaded passageway on the ground floor. These extensions support an upper story decorative concrete terrace with a low parapet wall that bounds the perimeter of the first floor roof. While historic views show trees and flowers planted in tubs and placed on the upper terrace, this area did not function as a terrace. Inset panels are incorporated into the parapet under each pair of second story windows. A cantilevered media agua supported by brackets and finished with Spanish tile occurs below the parapet to protect the first story windows. The media agua is not original.

Architectural details such as the large raised medallions between each arch, the ribbons of windows, and the inset panels on the parapet walls are few on this functional building which stresses linearity. The columns that flank the upper story windows appear to be both structural and decorative elements. The main doors to the ground floor are disguised within the arcaded passageway which takes precedence over the entry details; the covered passageway and porte cochere help signal the main entry presence. The south and west elevations have raised platforms or loading docks with cantilevered cement hoods. The south elevation platform is ramped. Each elevation of Building 238 has been modified. The building's fenestration is seriously compromised with many windows fully or partially infilled with stuccoed concrete blocks on the first and second story or have air conditioning units with plywood surrounds. Also, where windows exist they are typically modern replacements. The as builts show dripstone courses at each floor level; the media agua is a later addition. Also the open character of the ground floor passageway arches has been altered by the addition of T-shaped metal bannisters. All elevations exhibit infilled windows, giving the building a cold flat appearance at odds with the more open character of the 1917 building.

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 4)

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions:

Building 238 is rectangular, measuring 221'3" by 51'4" and containing 1,743 square feet. The central mass which contains both floors is 122' 5" in length; the southern extension is 42'5" in length while the northern extension is almost 56' in length. The front elevation has 16 bays. The approximate height of the building is 47'9" from the ground to the roof top. The ground floor is 12'6" high, the second floor 12'4" while the basement measured 12' in height. The ground floor arcaded passageway measures slightly over 9' in width.

2. Foundations:

The foundation is constructed of poured-in place reinforced concrete.

3. Walls:

The walls are constructed of concrete block. *Annual Reports of the Governor of the Panama Canal* prepared by the Resident Engineer for 1916, 1917, 1919 indicate that concrete block walls were plastered with two coats of cement and sand stucco and trowelled "to a dead finish." Concrete walls were rubbed and filled to match this finish.

4. Structural System:

The structural system of beams and columns is constructed of reinforced concrete.

5. Porches, Exterior stairs:

The arcaded concrete passageway that runs the length of the building is over 9' wide, connecting the building with the Isolation Ward, Section C, and the passageway and porte cochere connecting Building 237 to Building 238. The passageway accesses several doors that lead to the building proper or lead to isolated areas. Most of the entries are modernized, however some appear original. The second story concrete terraces with the low parapet walls appear intact.

## GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING

(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)

HABS No. CZ-11-B

(Page 5)

### 6. Chimneys:

As the building incorporated a bakery when it was first built, an interior chimney was located on the south elevation. This chimney is no longer present. A large interior ventilation shaft with a tile roof is located on the west side of the building.

### 7. Openings:

#### a. Doors:

The front elevation passageway has 16 bays or arches. Primary and secondary doors are located behind these arches in the following order on the front elevation (south to north): arch 1, 5-7, 9, 10, 14 and 16. Three sets of double doors, constructed of frame, screening and plywood with infilled transoms, appear behind arches 5, 6, and 7. In at least one example, an air conditioning unit is placed within a transom. Modern, single glass doors are also located on the facade (behind arches 1 and 9); the main entry to the building and primary door which accesses the main staircase lies behind arch 9. An elevator providing access to all floors is located behind arch 8. Secondary grilled metal double doors to locked storage areas are also located on the passageway level. Screened doors in wood frames give access to open storage areas on the north end of the ground floor passageway. Steel doors lead from the rear elevation loading dock into the building.

#### b. Windows:

Original windows were paired on the front elevation second story. Single windows were located on the first floor. The windows where still intact have modern steel frame window replacements. Many the window openings have been filled-in with stuccoed concrete block. Window air conditioning units are also visible with plywood surrounds in some former window openings. Windows within the front elevation passageway have security grills.

### 8. Roof:

#### a. Shape and Materials:

The roof is a low pitched, hipped roof with projecting eaves. The built-up roof system is constructed of yellow pine and covered with red Spanish tile.

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 6)

b. Skylights, Vents

Half-round copper louvered vents, three in the front roof elevation and three in rear elevation, are original or are identical steel replacements.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

The north wing basement floor was reserved as mess area for silver employees in the original floor plan, the south for the bakery, refrigeration machinery, etc. The basement plan noted that the south staircase was reserved for patients while the north staircase was reserved for doctors and nurses. The original first floor plan grouped all kitchen functions on the south side of the building and dining areas on the north separated by a central corridor. Two entries with staircases behind the eighth and ninth front elevation bays were located at the center of the building. The doors toward the south side of the building opened into the diet kitchen, steward's office, etc.; small corridors provided access to the many service areas on the south end of the first floor. The second floor originally had the two large dining rooms flanking the two staircases and a service area with four rooms.

The existing floor plan varies from the original as this building's use has changed dramatically. Rewiring plans dating to 1946 show that the general floor plan was still intact at that time with the exception of the bakery, which was removed from the basement floor shortly after it was built. By 1966, however, the upper story was renovated into a storage area and all kitchen functions were removed from the first story south portion of the building except for cold storage. Security areas, offices, and lounges replaced these functions as the building's use changed in its entirety. The southern staircase was removed and an elevator placed in its stead which opens onto the ground floor passageway.

The doctor and nurses staircase or north staircase and the added elevator are the primary access to all floors of the building. The basement floor has a number of unconnected areas or rooms with different functions. The southern portion of the building holds a separate storage and office area for the complex's Housekeeping Department. The northern area on this floor that once was set aside for the silver mess is now used for storage and this area is only accessed from the passageway. Entry from the rear elevation steel doors leads into a large open storage area in the central part of the building. This area is also separate from the front storage areas. The upper

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 7)

story areas leading off the main staircase still maintain a general sense of the original plan in their public areas. The remodeled offices of the Logistics Department are located on the first and second floor areas.

2. Stairways:

Only one original staircase that connects all the floor is intact. Situated in the front entry, the boxed, concrete staircase has a metal balustrade with some wood detailing

3. Flooring:

Flooring is concrete covered in some areas with tile or carpet.

4. Walls and Ceiling Finishes:

The walls and ceilings were painted concrete. *Annual Reports of the Governor of the Panama Canal* for 1916, 1917, and 1919 note that interior walls were treated with a wash of sulfate of zinc, two coats of flat-finish oil-based paint, followed by third coat of washable enamel paint. Health Department annual reports for years following the initial construction note frequent repaintings of the building's interior.

5. Openings:

Doors:

Modern doors were located within the renovated areas.

Windows:

Few windows were noted and those that were still in place were modern awning type windows.

6. Decorative Features and Trim:

This was a utilitarian building and much of the features that made it notable for use as a kitchen are no longer in place.



7. Hardware:

A built-in rectangular freezer door associated with the Cold Storage area was identified on the first floor.

8. Mechanical Equipment:

a. Heating and Air Conditioning:

Climate control in the building is supplied by window air conditioning units.

b. Lighting:

In keeping with its current use, the lighting has been updated with fluorescent lighting.

c. Plumbing Fixtures:

Plumbing fixtures on the first and second floor main restrooms are updated and do not feature any historic detailing.

d. Conveyance System:

A large modern elevator was placed within the main south stairwell.

9. Original Furnishings:

Original wood utility cabinets with diamond design occur on stair landings.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation:

The Kitchen and Mess is situated behind Building 237 on the side of Ancon Hill. It faces northeast. Diagonal parking spaces are located in front of the building, and a loading dock on its

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 9)

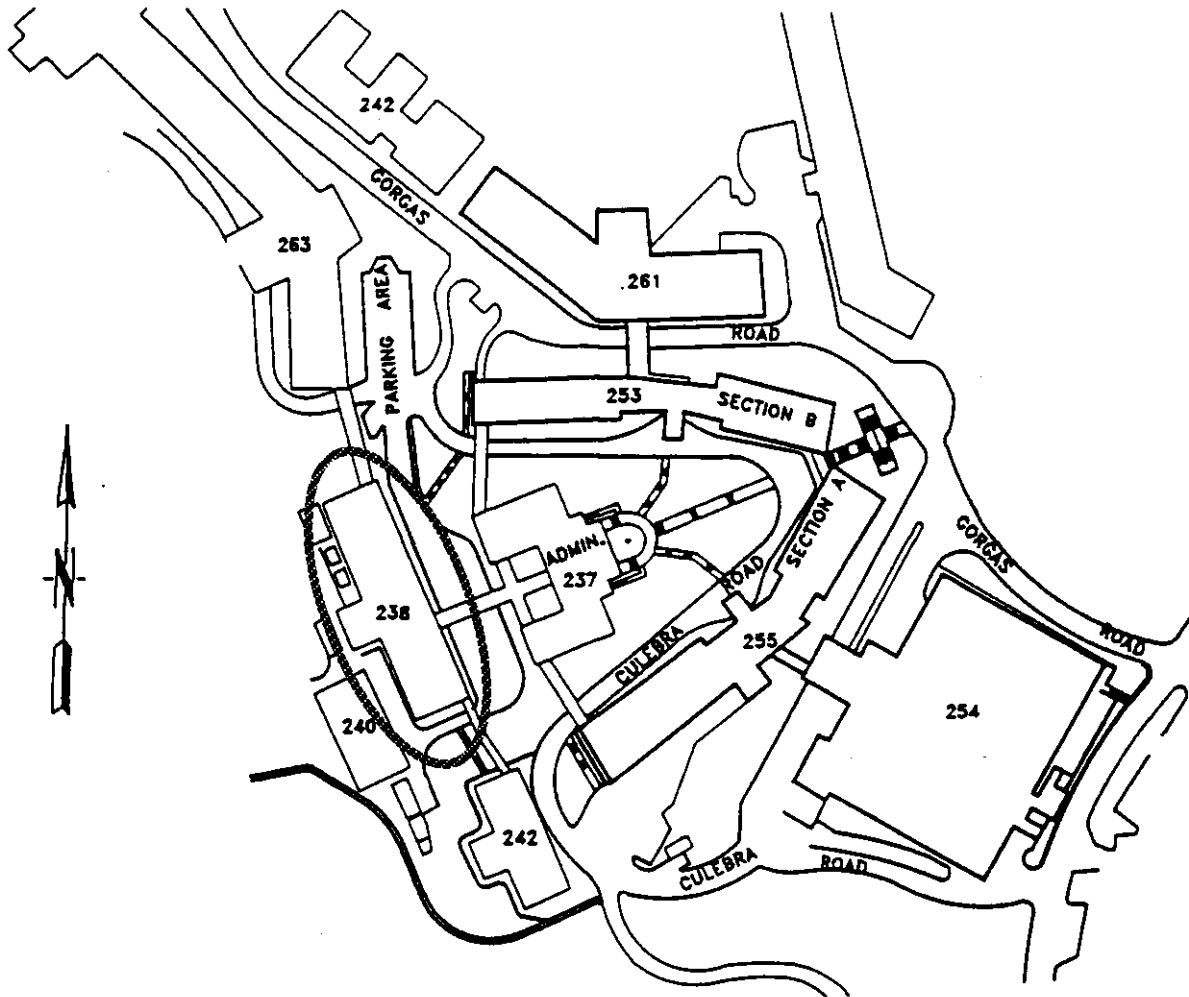


Figure 1 Map, 1996 (original located at Real Property Office, Corozal).  
Mapmaker unknown.  
GORGAS ARMY HOSPITAL COMPLEX

GORGAS HOSPITAL, KITCHEN AND MESS BUILDING  
(Gorgas Hospital, Building 238)  
HABS No. CZ-11-B  
(Page 10)

south and west elevation allows delivery of large freight. A cobbled area separates the front parking spaces from the building. It is connected to the Administration and Clinics Building by a covered passageway and porte cochere, to the Isolation Ward and Section C by raised passageways.

2. Historic Landscape Design:

No landscape design was identified. A historic exterior view was identified that partially shows the building facade looking to the northwest to Section C. This view, which shows two Royal Palms located in a grassed in area between the access street curb and the building, indicates that some original landscaping was in place after construction. This planting area is now cobbled; no palms are standing.

3. Outbuildings:

A vacant gabled roof building with cement and wood louvered walls is situated directly behind Building 238. This building which measures 26'6" by 27'10" was probably a support structure for the Kitchen and Mess building.